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THE

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# THE CATHOLIC WORLD.

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## THE POETS' LINCOLN.

BY CHARLES PHILLIPS.



IN our imaginative literature, despite the efforts of poets and story tellers, the figure of Lincoln still remains to a degree remote from us. He is not real in the manner or to the extent that one would suppose such a compelling character, the most inspiring and appealing and heroic personality in American history, would have become in the passage of over a century since his birth. While some of the most famous names in American literature have been signed to Lincoln poems, none has wholly succeeded in projecting through the medium of verse that figure and that soul, that Lincoln, which the mind of the average man impotently conjures up behind the pages of his history or his biography—a figure which still seems to move as behind a veil, waiting for, even demanding, the summons of that magic utterance which shall draw it forth in perfect light.

Of the contemporary poems, apart from those occasioned by the shock of Lincoln's assassination and the nation-wide mourning at his funeral, John James Piatt's *Sonnet in 1862* is the only one discoverable that speaks with the authentic voice of inspiration:

Stern be the pilot in the dreadful hour  
When a great nation, like a ship at sea  
With the wroth breakers whitening at her lee,  
Feels her last shudder if her helmsman cower;

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A godlike manhood be his mighty dower!  
Such and so gifted, Lincoln, mayest thou be  
With thy high wisdom's low simplicity  
And awful tenderness of voted power.  
From our hot records then thy name shall stand  
On Time's calm ledger out of passionate days—  
With the pure debt of gratitude begun,  
And only paid in never-ending praise—  
One of the many of a mighty land,  
Made by God's providence the Anointed One.

The death of Lincoln stirred some of the first singers of the land. Besides Whitman's *Captain, O My Captain*, the tragedy brought forth half a dozen other Lincoln poems of real power and vision from the pens of such poets as Bryant, Stoddard, Holmes, and the Cary sisters—Alice and Phoebe. Of these, the *Horatian Ode* of Richard Henry Stoddard (published in his complete poems by Scribner's, in 1880) is indisputably the best. It gives us more of Lincoln, and more of the mood of the nation at his passing, than any other poem we have. It seems to have been written in an exalted moment, its very measure, stately and simple and full of quiet grandeur, voicing at once the mourning and the man who was mourned. When this poet sings:

Peace! Let the long procession come,  
For hark!—the mournful muffled drum—  
The trumpet's wail afar—  
And see! the awful car!

there is instantly flashed to the imagination the whole feeling and aspect of a momentous and heart-touching event. The country's bereavement is pictured in these four brief lines. Then the picture passes in review:

Peace! Let the sad procession go,  
While cannon boom and bells toll slow;  
And go, thou sacred car,  
Bearing our woe afar. . .

So, sweetly, sadly, sternly goes  
The Fallen to his last repose;  
Beneath no mighty dome,  
But in his modest home.

The churchyard where his children rest,  
The quiet spot that suits him best;  
There shall his grave be made,  
And there his bones be laid.

The portrait Stoddard draws of Lincoln the man, in this same poem, is one of the few poetic visualizations we have of him. He shows him as

A laboring man, with horny hands,  
Who swung the axe, who tilled the lands—  
One of the people, born to be  
Their curious epitome.

This last couplet is one of the best things we have in our meagre Lincoln literature.

William Cullen Bryant's *The Death of Lincoln* is rather perfunctory and not stirring, but it contains some good lines; as for instance:

O slow to smite and swift to spare,  
Gentle and merciful and just,

so aptly characterizing the martyred President. And this:

Whose noblest monument shall be  
The broken fetters of the slave.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, writing for the Lincoln Memorial services in Boston in 1865, composed a hymn which is equally perfunctory, though faultless in measure and nobly reverent in tone. Lincoln is not in it, however, nor the light nor the beauty of his soul. The Cary sisters were more fortunate. Alice, stirred by the slanders of London *Punch* (nobly atoned for!) wrote a poem entitled *Abraham Lincoln* which has a fine spark of fire and spirit in it, and which contains some lines—two at least—of memorable beauty. Nothing ever written of Lincoln has been better done than this quatrain by “the gentle Alice:”

What need hath he now of a tardy crown,  
His name from mocking jest and sneer to save,  
*When every plowman turns his furrow down*  
*As soft as if it fell upon his grave?*

This is a stroke of genuine inspiration; in those last two lines the whole nation's love and reverence for Lincoln, and

Lincoln's own native "flavor of the soil," are expressed with unforgettable beauty of feeling and utterance.

In Phoebe Cary's tribute there is also to be found at least one memorable quatrain, glimpsing the lofty peace-ideals of Lincoln, and summing up the shock suffered by the nation at his murder, perpetrated in the very moment when the peace he so loved, was returned upon the land:

Lo! the beautiful feet upon the mountains,  
That yesterday stood;  
The white feet that came with glad tidings  
Are dabbled in blood!

But these elegiac poems, celebrating more the people's grief for the fallen man than the man himself, his personality and character, do not give us that living moving-picture of Lincoln which we demand of the muse. We must, perforce, piece together the various strokes and pencilings of many poets to make our portrait of him. For there are those who have in some degree glimpsed the soul of Lincoln, as well as some shadow of his rugged externals, in their verse; and from them we can outline a picture. Stoddard, already quoted, sang again of him, "common of mind"—

His thoughts the thoughts of other men,  
Plain were his words, and poor,  
But now they will endure.  
No hasty fool of stubborn will,  
But prudent, cautious, still—  
Who, since his work was good,  
Would do it as he could;

and Stedman has given us, in his poem written on the cast of Lincoln's hand, this graphic picture:

Look on this cast, and know the hand  
That bore a nation in its hold;  
From this mute witness understand  
What Lincoln was—how large of mold.

The man who sped the woodman's team  
And deepest sunk the plowman's share,  
And pushed the laden raft astream,  
Of fate before him unaware. . .



Firm hand that loftier office took,  
A conscious leader's will obeyed,  
And, when men sought his word and look,  
With steadfast might the gathering swayed.

The hand of Anak, sinewed strong,  
The fingers that on greatness clutch,  
Yet lo! the marks their lines along  
Of one who strove and suffered much.

For here in mottled cord and vein  
I trace the varying chart of years,  
I know the troubled heart, the strain,  
The weight of Atlas—and the tears.

Again I see the patient brow  
The palm erewhile was wont to press;  
And now 'tis furrowed deep, and now  
Made smooth with hope and tenderness.

For something of a formless grace  
This molded outline plays about;  
A pitying flame, beyond our trace,  
Breathes like a spirit, in and out—

The love that casts an aureole  
Round one who, longer to endure,  
Called mirth to cease his ceaseless dole,  
Yet kept his nobler purpose sure.

Lo, as I gaze, the statured man,  
Built up from yon large hand, appears;  
A type that nature wills to plan  
But once in all a people's years!

Again, in a sonnet *On the Death Mask of Abraham Lincoln*,  
Richard Watson Gilder drew one of the few vision-like pictures  
of the living Lincoln given us by our poets:

This bronze doth keep the very form and mold  
Of our great martyr's face. Yes, this is he:  
That brow all wisdom, all benignity;  
That human, humorous mouth; those cheeks that hold  
Like some harsh landscape all the summer's gold;  
That spirit fit for sorrow, as the sea  
For storms to beat on; the lone agony  
Those silent, patient lips too well foretold.

Yes, this is he who ruled a world of men  
 As might some prophet of the elder day—  
 Brooding above the tempest and the fray  
 With deep-eyed thought and more than mortal ken.  
 A power was his beyond the touch of art  
 Or armed strength—his pure and mighty heart!

Other poets, some in the midst of very long verses which today rather cloud and conceal than reveal Lincoln to us, have, nevertheless, at times flashed momentary visualizations of the man. Taken all together, these might be said to make a composite portrait of him. James Phinney Baxter, writing on *The Natal Day of Lincoln*, sees the same figure that Stoddard projected—the young Lincoln at his toil in “the darkling forest,” where his “ringing axe chimed with the music of the waterfall;” while James Whitcomb Riley, likewise going back to Lincoln’s earlier days, sings of his *Peaceful Life*:

A peaceful life—just toil and rest—  
 All his desire—  
 To read the books he liked the best  
 Beside the cabin fire,  
 God’s word, and man’s—to peer sometimes  
 Above the page, in smoldering gleams,  
 And catch, like far heroic rhymes,  
 The onmarch of his dreams.  
 A peaceful life—to hear the low  
 Of pastured herds,  
 Or woodman’s axe that, blow on blow,  
 Fell sweet as rhythmic words.  
 And yet there stirred within his breast  
 A faithful pulse, that, like the roll  
 Of drums, made high above his rest  
 A tumult in his soul!

Isaac Choate pictures him

of common elements, yet fine,  
 As in a wood of different species grows  
 Above all other trees the lordly pine,  
 Upon whose branches rest the winter snows,  
 Upon whose head warm beams of summer shine;

while Edwin Markham, using the same imagery when he sings of the tragic death, says:



When he fell in whirlwind, he went down  
As when a kingly cedar, green with boughs,  
Goes down with a great shout upon the hills  
And leaves a lonesome place against the sky.

Indeed, this same poem of Markham's (*Lincoln the Man of the People*), gives us many a striking line from which to draw our portrait of

A man that matched the mountains, and compelled  
The stars to look our way and honor us:

The color of the ground was in him, the red earth;  
The tang and odor of the primal things—  
The rectitude and patience of the rocks;  
The gladness of the wind that shakes the corn;  
The courage of the bird that dares the sea;  
The justice of the rain that loves all leaves;  
The pity of the snow that hides all scars;  
The loving-kindness of the wayside well;  
The tolerance and equity of light  
That gives as freely to the shrinking weed  
As to the great oak flaring to the wind—  
To the grave's low hill as to the Matterhorn  
That shoulders out the sky. And so he came  
From prairie cabin up to Capitol. . .  
Forevermore he burned to do his deed  
With the fine stroke and gesture of a king.  
He built the rail-pile as he built the State,  
Pouring his splendid strength through every blow,  
The conscience of him testing every blow  
To make his deed the measure of a man.

Something of this same figure, rugged, native-hued and of the soil, comes to us in James Riley's *Lincoln in his Office Chair*, which flashes us a picture of the Springfield lawyer newly come to the high estate of the nation's voted choice and bent upon the writing of his first inaugural. The poem was inspired by the chair which is preserved in the Oldroyd Museum in Washington; and reading it, it is not difficult for us to see again the man, "high-browed, rugged and swarthy, a picture of pain and care," sitting with "his greatest brief" before him, "his Country to him client," pondering in an awful, prayerful silence the dread task put upon him.

The face of Lincoln arrests the eye of all and stirs many poets to utterance. Whittier, inspired by the Emancipation Group presented to Boston in 1879 by Moses Kimball, tells us of the

worn frame, that rested not,  
Save in a martyr's grave;  
The care-lined face, that none forgot,  
Bent to the kneeling slave.

"Tall, ungainly, gaunt of limb, rudely nature molded him," says Hamilton Schuyler in his *Lincoln Centenary Ode*:

Awkward form and homely face,  
Owing naught to outward grace;  
Yet behind the rugged mien  
Were a mind and soul serene,  
And in deepest eyes there shone  
Genius that was all his own,  
Humor quaint with pathos blent  
To his speech attraction lent;  
Telling phrase and homely quip  
Falling lightly from the lip.  
Eloquent of tongue, and clear,  
Logical, devoid of fear,  
Making plain whate'er was dense  
By the light of common sense.

In an ode written by Henry T. Tuckerman for the funeral services held in New York City in April, 1865, this touching line appears—

Blood-quenched the pensive eye's soft light,

a half dozen words that somehow possess the power of summing up all the gentleness of Lincoln's nature, and the pathos of his mad taking off. And in *The Eyes of Lincoln*, Walt Mason gives us a glimpse of the soul that looked out on the world through

Sad eyes that were patient and tender,  
Sad eyes that were steadfast and true,  
And warm with the unchanging splendor  
Of courage no ills could subdue!

Eyes dark with the dread of the morrow,  
And woe for the day that was gone,  
The sleepless companions of sorrow,  
The watchers that witnessed the dawn.

Eyes tired from the clamor and goading  
And dim from the stress of the years,  
And hallowed by pain and foreboding  
And strained by repression of tears.

Charlotte Becker portrays his "gaunt rough-hewn face, that bore the furrowed signs of days of conflict, nights of agony," and sings of his "brave weary heart that tears of blood for every battle shed;" a sentiment which Herman Hagedorn, in his *O Patient Eyes*, makes still more vivid:

O patient eyes! oh, bleeding, mangled heart!  
O hero, whose wide soul, defying chains,  
Swept at each army's head,  
Swept to the charge and bled,  
Gathering in one too sorrow-laden heart  
All woes, all pains;  
The anguish of the trusted hope that wanes,  
The soldier's wound, the lonely mourners smart.  
He knew the noisy horror of the fight,  
From dawn to dusk, and through the hideous night  
He heard the hiss of bullets, the shrill scream  
Of the wide-arching shell,  
Scattering at Gettysburg or by Potomac's stream  
Like summer showers, the pattering rain of death;  
With every breath  
He tasted battle, and in every dream,  
Trailing like mists from gaping walls of hell,  
He heard the thud of heroes as they fell.

This war-ridden loneliness of Lincoln, keeping his anxious and prayerful vigils while the country trembled or slept, has appealed strongly to the poets. Vachel Lindsay, in writing recently of the present War, pictured Lincoln returned and pacing in sadness the same familiar ways he trod half a century ago, anxious and uneasy, praying and puzzling out the nation's problem. Margaret E. Sangster, writing during the Centenary in 1909, likewise recalls him as a watcher of the night, vicariously suffering his country's woes the while he watched:



O man of many sorrows, 'twas your blood  
That flowed at Chickamauga, at Bull Run,  
Vicksburg, Antietam, and the gory wood  
And Wilderness of ravenous deaths that stood  
Round Richmond like a ghostly garrison:  
Your blood for those who won,  
For those who lost, your tears!  
For you the strife, the fears,  
For us, the sun!

For you the lashing winds and the beating rain in your eyes,  
For us the ascending stars and the wide, unbounded skies!

Oh, man of storms! Patient and kingly soul!  
Oh, wise physician of a wasted land!  
A nation felt upon its heart your hand,  
And lo, your hand hath made the shattered, whole;  
With iron clasp your hand hath held the wheel  
Of the lurching ship, on tempest waves no keel  
Hath ever sailed.

A grim smile held your lips when strong men quailed.  
You strove alone with chaos, and prevailed!  
You felt the grinding shock, and did not reel;  
And ah, your hand that cut the battle's path  
Wide with the devastating plague of wrath,  
Your bleeding hand, gentle with pity yet,  
Did not forget  
To bless, to succor, and to heal.

Thus are we made to see the patient, long suffering Lincoln, keeping his world-vigil—perhaps the most appealing picture of the man the muse can conjure up; for what is more heart-moving than a strong man at prayer? Far greater such a sight than even a strong man in tears! So it is not difficult for us to see the Lincoln that Lyman Whitney Allen visions for us in his poem on *Lincoln's Church at Washington* (the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, where Lincoln and his family worshipped while at the national capital). Here the poet touches with reverent hand the pew

Where Lincoln prayed! What passion had his soul—  
Mixt faith and anguish, melting into prayer!

Nor has his humor altogether escaped his bards. He was the one, as Benjamin Franklin Taylor sang in his *Centennial Poem* (1876), “who never caused a tear, but when he died;”

a tribute which, of course, comprehends far more than his mere gift of humor; while S. Weir Mitchell sees "his spirit armed in mail of rugged mirth." Tom Taylor, of London *Punch*, in his historic tribute of amendment, tells "how his quaint wit made home-truths more true;" and the same Charlotte Becker, whose pen-picture of his rugged face has already been quoted, speaks of how, amid all his care and sorrow, he

Yet called on mirth to help his comrades bear  
The waiting hours of anguish—

all of which, while not specifically stating the fact, points with renewed emphasis the striking truth that Lincoln, however he grieved over his country's sufferings, never was guilty of the unpardonable sin of self-pity!

The dramatic contrasts of Lincoln's story should be a fecund source of inspiration to the poets. His humble origin, his rise to the world's highest eminence, are among the most inspiring facts in all human biography. Frederick Lucian Hosmer caught from the legend of his lowly birth inspiration for an unforgettable line of poetry—

Still from the humble Nazareths come  
The saviours of the race;

and so also

Not in the pampered court of kings  
Not in the homes that rich men keep,  
God calls His Davids with their slings  
Or wakes His Samuels from their sleep,

sings Charles Monroe Dickinson.

"No flutter of the banners bold" came heralding him, says John Vance Cheney:

Not his their blare, their pageantries,  
Their goal, their glory was not his;  
Humbly he came to keep  
The flocks, to feed the sheep;

and of his mother and the heroic obscurity from which he sprung through her, Harriet Monroe sings with this exquisite lyric grace in her *Nancy Hanks*:

Prairie child,  
Brief as dew,  
What winds of wonder  
Nourished you?



Rolling plain  
    Of billowy green;  
Fair horizons,  
    Blue serene;  
  
Lofty skies  
    The slow clouds climb—  
Where burning stars  
    Beat out the time:  
  
These, and the dreams  
    Of fathers bold,  
Baffled longings,  
    Hopes untold,  
  
Gave to you  
    A heart of fire,  
Love like water,  
    Brave desire. . .  
  
Wilding lady,  
    Still and true,  
Who gave us Lincoln  
    And never knew!

It was in the same strain that Julia Ward Howe, then in her ninetieth year, sang when she wrote her *Lincoln* for the Centenary celebration in Boston in 1909:

---

Through the dim pageant of the years  
A wondrous tracery appears:  
A cabin of the western wild  
Shelters in sleep a new-born child.  
  
Nor nurse nor parent dear can know  
The way those infant feet must go;  
And yet a nation's help and hope  
Are sealed within that horoscope!

The reference to Nazareth, noted in Hosmer's lines above, reminds us that the analogy between the life of Lincoln and the earthly days of Christ is often drawn by the poets; but not always with the reverence, or the reticence or delicacy that would have pleased that Lincoln who, as Madison Cawein says, "liked not praise, being most diffident."

In fact, Lincoln would shrink from that comparison; rather he would raise an instant and silencing hand against



it. And that his hand could silence, that voice of his command, is one fact that has not escaped some of our poets. In *The Master*, Edwin Arlington Robinson asks:

Was ever master yet so mild,  
As he, and so untamable?  
We doubted, even when he smiled,  
Not knowing that he knew so well.

He knew that undeceiving fate  
Would shame us whom he served unsought;  
He knew that he must wince and wait—  
The jest of those for whom he fought.

He knew devoutly what he thought  
Of us and of our ridicule;  
He knew that we must all be taught  
Like little children in a school.

And what appears if we review  
The season when we railed and chaffed?  
It is the face of one who knew  
That we were learning while we laughed.

Such a Lincoln, however he would have endured the sneers and jibes of his enemies, would not for a moment have suffered the extravagant praise of adulation. "He knew to bide his time," said Lowell; but

Our children shall behold his fame,  
The kindly-earnest, brave, foreseeing man,  
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame.

"I knew the man," sings Boker in his *Lincoln*:

I knew the man. I see him, as he stands  
With gifts of mercy in his outstretched hands;  
A kindly light within his gentle eyes,  
Sad as the toil in which his heart grew wise;  
His lips half parted with the constant smile  
That kindled truth, but foiled the deepest guile;  
His head bent forward, and his willing ear  
Divinely patient right and wrong to hear:  
Great in his goodness, humble in his state,  
Firm in his purpose, yet not passionate. . .  
A nature molded on a higher plan,  
Lord of himself, an inborn gentleman!

It is not only the life and deeds and the magnetic personality of Lincoln that have inspired our poets. His words, too, have come as a living text to many singers—words that in some instances are themselves the essence of poetry. The ease with which his Gettysburg Speech may be recast in the form of free verse, without the change of a word, is well known: the experiment has been often made, and always successfully, in these days of *vers libre*. But this noble utterance of Lincoln's had not to wait for the vogue of formlessness in verse to inspire poets to sing of it and re-sing it, as witness Bayard Taylor's *Gettysburg Ode*, written forty years ago. In this, having sounded his sonorous opening lines:

After the eyes that looked, the lips that spake  
Here, from the shadows of impending death,  
Those words of solemn breath,  
What voice may fitly break  
The silence, doubly hallowed, left by him?

the poet reiterates Lincoln's words, changed to rhythmic and rhyming measure, producing a really fine poem, and one that, despite the alterations from the original text, cannot be said to weaken the thought or its expression in the smallest degree. So, in *Lincoln at Springfield, 1861*, Anna Bache, a Philadelphia poet, paraphrases his farewell address before his departure for Washington, ending with this transcription of his actual words:

Pray for me, friends, that God may make  
My judgment clear, my duty plain;  
For if the Lord no wardship take  
The watchmen mount the towers in vain.

Nor is it our own American poets alone who have celebrated Lincoln in verse. Even to the eyes of old Europe, which in his day could see only crudity and rawness in the Western Republic, the figure of Lincoln, while he still lived, loomed large and world-significant. Tom Taylor's famous poem in London *Punch*, retracting the jibes against Lincoln of which the British humorist had been so flagrantly guilty, is too well known to need more than mention. Its opening lines:

You lay a wreath on murdered Lincoln's bier?  
You, who with mocking pencil wont to trace  
Broad for self-complacent British sneer,  
His length of shambling limb, his furrowed face?



might be said now to have become a classic of real "poetic justice" and restitution. But it was not all sneers in England, where Lincoln was concerned. As far back as January, 1863, we find a poet, Edmund Ollier, writing in the *London Morning Star* a sonnet of appreciation, in which Lincoln is hailed as "the Northern Sun," rising on its way,

Cleaving the stormy distance—every ray  
Sword-bright, sword-sharp, in God's invisible hand.

Another English poet, anonymous, writing in Macmillan's magazine, uses somewhat the same figure, characterizing Lincoln as the man

Who fought, and fought the noblest fight  
And marshalled it from stage to stage,  
Victorious, out of dusk and dark,  
And into dawn and on till day. . .

But it was the shock of the shameful taking off of the American President, at the moment when he had achieved what all Europe doubted could ever be done, that shook the old world poets to a realization of his grandeur. Even London *Fun* printed its tribute of verse, calling him "the man whose dirge all Europe sings;" while Robert Leighton, writing in May, 1865, at Liverpool, and addressing the assassin, said these prophetic words:

Even thy treacherous deed shall glance aside  
And do the dead man's will by land and sea;  
Win bloodless battles, and make that to be  
Which to his living mandate was denied!

The spirit of democracy, too, was stirred to utterance in the Old World by Lincoln as never since the days of Washington. We find one English poet, Henry De Garrs, celebrating him as "a king of men, inured to hardy toil," who

Rose truly royal up the steep of life,  
Till Europe's monarchs seemed to dwarf the while  
Beneath his greatness!

How Europe's monarchs are dwarfed today "beneath his greatness!" That spirit of democracy, of the inevitable supremacy of the common people, which Lincoln evoked while he breathed and moved in the world, stirs all the more potently now across the face of the earth because of him,



summoned as it is by the ideals which he lived, fought, and died to make secure. If today—as one British poet sang in 1865 (John Nichol, Professor of English Literature at the University of Glasgow, 1861-1865)—

Freedom's rising star  
Beacons above a hundred thousand graves,

it is because such men as Abraham Lincoln have lived and lifted their voices up in the councils of humanity, conjuring that star out of the darkness—nay more, kindling its fire from their own steady flaming souls. And that is the star upon which our poets must fix their eyes, if they are to sing authentically of Lincoln and the things his name and his story stand for. In a way, it might be said that the fame and fate of Lincoln rests with the poets: he will be remote from us until they seize upon him: it is they who must preserve his tradition, who must hand him down to our children a living breathing figure, a personality from which their young souls shall catch inextinguishable fire; it is they, the poets, who must part the veil of records and facts behind which he still moves a little vaguely, a little indistinctly, and conjure him forth in full stature and full light, so that we shall see him even as the historian and the romancer never may project him. And we need him now! We need the great Lincoln poem now! Will it come? “Dare we despair?” asks one of our younger poets, Arthur Guiterman, in his sonnet *He Leads Us Still*:

Dare we despair? Through all the nights and days  
Of lagging war he kept his courage true.  
Shall doubt befog our eyes? A darker haze  
But proved the faith of him who ever knew  
That right must conquer. May we cherish hate  
For our poor griefs, when never word nor deed  
Of rancor, malice, spite of low or great,  
In his large soul one poison-drop could breed?

He leads us still! O'er chasms yet unspanned  
Our pathway lies; the work is but begun;  
But we shall do our part and leave our land  
The mightier for noble battles won.  
Here truth must triumph, honor must prevail:  
The nation Lincoln died for, cannot fail!